DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 316 902 CS 507 098

AUTHOR Hellweg, Susan A.
TITLE The Sponsorship of Presidential Debates: Historical Perspectives and Alternatives.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 39p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (75th, San Francisco, CA, November 18-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Debate; Elections; Mass Media Role; Media Research; Persuasive Discourse; Political Candidates; Political Issues; Political Parties; *Presidential Campaigns (United States)
IDENTIFIERS *League of Women Voters; Media Coverage; Political Communication; Political History; Sponsors; *Television Networks

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the development of sponsors for primary and general election debates at the presidential level and considers the various sponsorship alternatives for future debates. From a historical perspective, the paper discusses the major role that the broadcasting industry played in the early presidential debates and enumerates the changes in the format, coverage, and sponsorship of the debates through the one vice-presidential and two presidential debates in 1988. The paper appraises the merits of the television networks, the political parties, Congress, the League of Women Voters, and the Commission on Presidential Debates with regard to presidential debate sponsorship. The paper concludes that there has been an apparent shift of control from debate sponsor to the candidates themselves since 1960. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (KEH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED316902

The Sponsorship of Presidential Debates: Historical Perspectives and Alternatives

Susan A. Hellweg

Department of Speech Communication

San Diego State University

Committee on the Joint Appearances of Political Candidates

Speech Communication Association Convention

San Francisco, CA

November 1989

Running head: PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

CS507098

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

SUSAN A. HELLWEG

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

Televised political debates have provided the American public an alternative source of information about candidates running for office to appearances through nightly news coverage of the campaign trail and carefully packaged media commercials. These events have allowed the public to view and/or hear opposing candidates in a single context simultaneously (providing for immediate comparison and contrast of candidates and forcing evaluation of the opposition). These debates have given the public the opportunity to actually compare candidates under pressure against one another on issue or image related information. Through these debates, the voters have had the opportunity to see candidates for an extended period of time; only through national television programs such as "Meet the Press," "Face the Nation," or "This Week with David Brinkley," or local programs of a similar nature, has the public otherwise had the opportunity to see a candidate discuss his positions at length. Nightly news media coverage does not afford the viewer this opportunity; viewers who do not see these extended broadcasts and who simply rely on news programs for candidate information must base their political decision making on very brief abstracts of events along

the campaign trail and little, if any, simultaneous comparison of candidates.

These debates have not only served as a means to inform the electorate, but have probably also elevated the quality of public dialogue. In addition, the debates have offered candidates the opportunity to sharpen the issue differences between one another in the eyes of the public and to convey their messages without the usual press conference interruptions. Other benefits of the debates have likely included a better educated public about campaign issues and increased public interest in voting participation. From the standpoint of campaign expenditures, these debates have mostly likely given the candidates the opportunity to speak to the largest and most attentive audience at the least expense, no matter what the level of election involved. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) also note that debates aid in assessing the campaign, mirror changes in campaigns, and increase candidate accountabilities.

Sponsorship of presidential debates has largely been a function of government regulatory legislation and the ability of specific sponsors to ensure that the debates have taken place. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the development of sponsors

for primary and general election debates at the presidential level and to consider the various sponsorship alternatives for future debates.

Historical Perspective

The broadcasting industry played the major role in the development of the early presidential debates. The first broadcast debate occurred on radio on May 17, 1948 between Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen in connection with the Oregon primary. This one-hour encounter featured 20-minute opening statements, 8 1/2-minute rebuttals from the candidates, and focused on a single issue, the question of outlawing Communism in the United States. On May 21, 1956 the first nationally televised debate was held between Estes Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson in connection with the Florida primary. Hubert Humphrey and John Kennedy engaged in a West Virginia primary debate on May 3, 1960 which was televised throughout the East Coast and West Virginia.

In 1959 Congress amended Section 315 of the Communications Act so that broadcasters would be exempt from the requirements of the equal time provision for all political candidates given that four conditions of what they covered would be met: (1) it was a "bonafide newscast"; (2) it was a "bonafide news interview"; (3)

it was a "bonafide news documentary"; and (4) it represented "on the spot coverage of bonafide news events" (Martel, 1983, p. 174). In the 1960 presidential campaign four general election debates were held between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon after Senate Joint Resolution 207 temporarily suspended Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934 for presidential and vice presidential candidates (Zapple, 1979, p. 58). The four one-hour Kennedy-Nixon debates were all nationally broadcast from television studios, were moderated by television news broadcasting personnel, and involved both broadcasting and print media specialists as panelists, primarily the former. An attempt to impose the 1948 format failed because the candidates thought they would draw little interest and no single issue prevailed in the campaign over others. Each debate provided for rebuttals, but no follow-up questions. Opening and closing statements were featured in the first and fourth debates, as well as limited subject matter.

Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy engaged in a single primary debate on June 1, 1968 as part of the "Issues and Answers" series on ABC. Held in connection with the California primary, the program featured three ABC broadcasters in the role of panelists. In the 1972

primary season, this plan was followed for three Democratic debates, the first on "Face the Nation" (CBS), between Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern on May 28, the second on "Meet the Press" (NBC) between these same two candidates on May 30, and the third on "Issues and Answers" (ABC) involving Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, Shirley Chisholm, Sam Yorty, and a representative for George Wallace (Taylor Hardin) on June 4, all in connection with the California primary.

The Aspen Institute decision in 1975 radically changed the role of broadcasters in the coverage of debates and subsequently affected the sponsorship and location of the 1976 presidential campaign debates, as well as the participation of broadcasters as moderators or panelists in them, by specifying that broadcasters could be exempt from equal time provisions for debates if five conditions were met: (1) that they were set up by a third party (not affiliated with a broadcaster) on the assumption that this way they would not be both making and covering the news; (2) that the events would take place outside of a broadcasting studio; (3) that they would be covered live (so as to safeguard their newsworthiness); (4) that they be covered in their entirety (so as to preclude the potential for biased editing); and (5) that they be centered around "good

faith journalistic judgment of the newsworthiness of the event" and not be inclined toward the political interests of any single candidate (Martel, 1983, p. 174).

It was at this point that the League of Women Voters stepped into the role of a presidential debate sponsor. The League sponsored four Democratic presidential primary campaign debates between February and May 1976 which were nationally televised. These debates were cast as regional forums (New England Forum, Southern Forum, Mid-Atlantic Forum, and Mid-West Forum) and essentially set the stage for regular televised presidential debate encounters during the primary season. Using a specific political theme for each debate (employment, inflation, energy; social security, welfare; urban issues; defense, detente, trade), these events were held in a community location (not a broadcasting studio) and utilized "subject area experts" as panelists, rather than journalists, although the same journalist was featured as the moderator consistently.

Sixteen years after the Kennedy-Nixon debates took place, general election presidential debates were resumed with three 90-minute Carter-Ford presidential encounters and one 75-minute vice-presidential

encounter between Walter Mondale and Robert Dole. Among the features of the formats were follow-up questions, rebuttals, and closing statements. Only the vice-presidential debate featured opening statements. These events, like their primary counterparts, were sponsored by the League of Women Voters and were held in community facilities. However, in this case, print and broadcast media journalists served as panelists (primarily the former) and as moderators (primarily the latter). Besides the fact that this series of debates represented the initiation of vice-presidential encounters, possibly the two most notable media-related incidents associated with it were the 27-minute audio gap in the first Carter-Ford debate (where the television media had a decision to stop transmitting the event or stay with it, a decision affected, of course, by the 1975 ruling relative to its role in covering such events versus in any way creating them) (see Lang & Lang, 1978) and the Ford miscue in the second debate with Carter about Soviet domination of Eastern Europe (where audience perceptions of the miscue did not become totally crystallized until media interpretations of the event intervened) (see Steeper, 1978). This gaffe probably served to heighten candidate fears of losing control in debates and to

strengthen candidate perceptions that a tightly structured format, where little is left to chance, must be negotiated with the sponsor of these events.

The 1980 presidential campaign featured five televised Republican primary debates between January and April and two general election debates, the first between John Anderson and Ronald Reagan and the second between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. For the primary debates, the concept of "subject area experts" as panelists was abandoned. Three of the five televised primary debates were sponsored by the League of Women Voters, another by the Des Moines Register, and another by the University of Southern Carolina and the Columbian Record (Hellweg, 1982; Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). Print media journalists were employed almost exclusively for three of the primary debates as panelists; for the other two primary debates, no panelists were utilized. For four of the five debates, broadcasters acted as moderators, while for the remaining one a print media journalist served in this role. Possibly the most significant event from a media perspective was the Reagan "control of the microphone" incident in not one of the five televised debates but rather a local debate in Nashua, New Hampshire over the inclusion of other candidates besides himself and

George Bush, which was covered by the media subsequent to the debate itself, and which proclaimed Reagan a commanding candidate (see Martel, 1983).

As the sponsor of the two general election debates, the League of Women Voters was placed in an awkward position with the emergence of a viable independent party candidate, John Anderson. The first of these two debates, between Reagan and Anderson represented the only time (a) a minor party candidate has participated in a general election debate, and (b) one of the major party candidates was absent. Subsequent to the first encounter, the League established a 15% polling rule on the inclusion of candidates in a debate, leaving Anderson out of the second debate between Reagan and Carter. For the two 1980 general election debates all but one of the panelists were print media journalists (the exception being a broadcaster). The moderators in both cases were broadcasters. Both events were held in community locations. The Reagan-Anderson debate lasted 90 minutes, and featured six main questions (no follow-up questions), candidate rebuttals, and closing statements. The Carter-Reagan debate lasted 90 minutes and allowed for eight main questions, follow-up questions, and closing statements. A particularly

notable format feature in this debate was the use of two rebuttals for the candidates in each round.

In 1981, the FCC ruled to allow debates to be televised from broadcasting studios for "technical convenience" as long as a "qualified" sponsor had arranged the event (Martel, 1983, p. 174). Over November 8, 1983, the FCC announced a ruling which significantly altered the sponsorship of future debates. Much against the objections of the League of Women Voters, the FCC ruled that radio and television stations could stage debates involving candidates of their own choosing without violating equal time provisions (Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). The effect of this ruling was seen in the proliferation of Democratic presidential primary debates in the next election and in the growth in the variety of sponsors involved in convening these events. During the primary season, 14 Democratic debates were televised nationally, regionally, and locally between October 1983 and June 1984 (Ritter & Hellweg, 1986) through commercial network, cable, and public broadcasting outlets. Ironically, while both CBS and NBC sponsored a couple of these events, ABC did not do so; the CBS broadcast on March 28, 1984 represented the first network-sponsored debate since the McGovern-Humphrey series of

primary debates in 1972 (Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). Among the other sponsors for the primary debate telecasts were the League of Women Voters (four), the Des Moines Register, the Boston Globe, WNBC-TV in New York, and, for the first time, a number of independent organizations, namely the Harvard Institute of Politics and the Massachusetts Citizens Coalition for Arms Control, the U. S. House of Representatives Democratic Caucus, the Iowa Farm Unity Forum, and the Chicago Bar Association (Hellweg, 1984; Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). A variety of formats was tested in these debates. Traditional panelists were almost entirely dispensed with. Television news anchors or commentators were often the moderators (e.g., Tom Brokaw, John Chancellor, Ted Koppel, Dan Rather, Sander Vanocur, and Barbara Walters), an informal format generally being used by them to stimulate discussion rather than the proceedings being legislated by panelist questions (Hellweg, 1984). Community facilities were employed by and large for these debates (including universities).

The two presidential and single vice-presidential debates in 1984, between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale and between George Bush and Geraldine Ferraro, respectively, were sponsored by the League of Women Voters. For all three events, the moderators were

journalists; the panelists were broadcast and print media journalists, primarily the latter. The two presidential debates were 100 minutes and 90 minutes, respectively, the first on domestic policy issues and the second on foreign policy issues. The 90-minute vice-presidential debate was split between foreign and domestic subject matter. All three debates featured follow-up questions, candidate rebuttals, and closing statements.

Reports from the deliberations of two national study groups on presidential debates in 1985 and 1986 significantly affected the sponsorship of these events in 1988. First, the bipartisan Commission on National Elections, established by the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University in February 1985, co-chaired by Melvin Laird and Robert Strauss, and comprised of 40 representatives from the media, business, public service, labor, and public interest organizations, recommended that (a) presidential debates should be institutionalized, and (b) the two major political parties should assume responsibility for ensuring that their nominees would participate in such events by securing their commitment prior to their nomination. Included with the report was a Memorandum of Agreement on Presidential Candidate

Joint Appearances signed by the chairmen of the Republican and Democratic Party National Committees, Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk, two members of the Commission.

Second, a study group, assembled in December 1986 at the Harvard University Institute of Politics, sponsored by the Twentieth Century Fund, chaired by Newton Minow, and comprised of 30 participants and observers of past debates, recommended that: (a) presidential debates should be institutionalized to prevent their speculation from taking over the focus of the campaigns themselves; and (b) the two major parties should jointly establish a non-profit, tax-exempt bipartisan organization to coordinate the development and execution of these events. Much to the opposition of the League of Women Voters, on February 18, 1987 the chairmen of the two major parties announced the formation of the Commission on Presidential Debates, a body whose purpose it was to sponsor both presidential and vice-presidential debates commencing with the 1988 campaign. Co-chaired by these two individuals, the ten-member Commission laid the foundation for three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate in the fall.[1]

Whether due to these events or not, the 1988

presidential campaign witnessed the proliferation of nearly triple the number of primary debates in 1984 and in the continuation of a wide variety of debate sponsors. Without an incumbent in the race, both Democrats and Republicans engaged in televised debates, primarily the former. The first prime time televised debate for the 1988 presidential race occurred on July 1, 1987, bringing the intiation of such encounters much earlier than ever before. These televised debates were almost exclusively covered by cable and public broadcasting outlets. Only one national network offered a debate, NBC, on December 1, 1987 (during prime time); this particular debate, prior to the official primary/caucus season, involved both Democratic and Republican candidate segments on foreign and domestic policy issues (alternating order) and was moderated by Tom Brokaw. The League of Women Voters sponsored two back-to-back Democratic and Republican debates in February, just prior to the New Hampshire primary, plus a Democratic debate in New York in April. Print media sponsors included the Des Moines Register (as in 1980 and 1984) for both Republican and Democratic debates; The Dallas Morning News and The Texas Monthly (in conjunction with KERA-TV) for both Republican and Democratic debates, and The Atlanta

Journal and The Atlanta Constitution for both Republican and Democratic debates. Community sponsors included the League of Iowa Municipalities for a Democratic debate; the Brown & Black Coalition for a Democratic debate; the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, the League of Rural Voters, and the Prairiefire Rural Action organization for a Democratic debate; the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies (in conjunction with WLS-TV) for a Democratic debate. Political organizations sponsoring televised debates included the Democratic Leadership Council for several Democratic debates and state party organizations.

Broadcasting organizations also played a role in the arranging of some of these debates: the National Association of Producers and Television Editors (NAPTE) for a Democratic debate and the Radio/Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) (in conjunction with Iowa Broadcasting and KRTA-Radio) for a Democratic debate. Moderators in these debates were generally nationally recognized broadcast journalists (e.g., Ken Bode, Tom Brokaw, William F. Buckley, John Chancellor, Linda Ellerbee, Edwin Newman, Roger Mudd, and Judy Woodruff), with exceptions occurring in some of the community-sponsored forums where a key representative played this role. When panelists were utilized (not often), they

sometimes consisted of journalists, though on a few occasions a member of the opposite political party (a new feature in the 1988 primary debates) was present to query the candidates. Universities were among the community locations employed for these debates.

The two presidential and single vice-presidential debates in 1988, between George Bush and Michael Dukakis and between Dan Quayle and Lloyd Bentsen, respectively, were sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates. As early as July 7, 1987, the Commission on Presidential Debates announced that it would be sponsoring general election debates on September 14 (Annapolis), September 25 (Wake Forest), October 11 (Pittsburgh), and October 27 (Omaha); on July 1, 1988, the League of Women Voters announced the sponsorship of general election debates on September 8 (Birmingham), October 6 (Minneapolis-St. Paul), October 23 (Boston), and November 1 (Los Angeles). Prior to the three debates which eventually took place, a 16-page Memorandum of Understanding was generated by representatives of Vice-President Bush and Governor Dukakis outlining the conditions under presidential and vice-presidential debates could be held. (In 1984 a Memorandum of Understanding was developed in conjunction with the League of Women Voters, though not

signed by its representatives, and was only three pages in length.) This document was presented to the potential sponsors of these debates. Outlined in this document were: (a) the number of debates; (b) their dates; (c) their sponsorship (the Commission for the first two debates and the League of Women Voters for the third debate); (d) their location; (e) their times; (f) their format (time elements); (g) role of the moderator and panelists; (h) use of closing statements; (i) the specific questioning pattern; (j) candidate address form; (k) the selection process for the moderator and panelists; (l) the staging (camera placement); (m) microphones; (n) height of the podiums; (o) camera shot limitations; (p) audience control; (q) the use of green-amber-red timing signal lights; (r) candidate opportunities for technical briefing sessions; (s) use of makeup specialists; (t) use of notes, use of aides and security personnel, color of the backdrop; (u) use of tally lights on the cameras; (v) ticket distribution and seating arrangements; and (w) use of dressing rooms/holding rooms.

On October 3, 1988 the League of Women Voters withdrew its sponsorship from the second presidential debate, scheduled for ten days later in Los Angeles,

arguing against the terms stipulated in the Memorandum of Understanding presented to them on September 28. Additional stipulations of the candidates to the Memorandum of Understanding consisted of an open-ended financial agreement for the debates to be assumed by the League, the provision of a telephone line to the moderator via the producer from the campaign representatives during the debate, plus particular backdrop and rug specifications for the debate staging.[2] The League argued on principle that the campaigns were taking over the events, that "the campaigns had determined what the television cameras could take pictures of...had determined how they would select those who would pose questions to their candidates...had determined that the press would be relegated to the last two rows of supporters...had determined the format."[3] In a press release made that day, they described the agreement as a "closed-door masterpiece." A point of particular concern to the League in the agreement was the lack of opportunity for follow-up questions. Interestingly, eight days later CBS issued a statement from Dan Rather indicating that he would "prefer to report on the process than participate in it," pulling out of a panelist role in the second presidential debate, saying that "the

procedures they have developed are not the best" (Sharbutt, 1988, p. I-II).

The League had drawn up a proposal in May 1988 (as they had in May 1984) for a moderator-only format. A Washington Post story ("Dates Set for," 1988) reported that Dukakis was willing to participate in a moderator-only format; however, Bush's representative, James Baker, indicated that they would only consider it if a 60-minute debate format were utilized rather than a 90-minute one. The Dukakis camp then turned down the proposal, putting the League proposal out of the negotiation process.

In a study providing an indepth analysis of 46 newspaper editorials resulting from the League's decision to withdraw from the second presidential debate, Fish (1988) found five categorical themes. Eight editorials argued in support of the League's decision, but also contended "that the show must go on" (p. 10). Two editorials offered support for the League's position, but also expressed the belief that good could result from the outcome by "the Commission on Presidential Debates taking the League's criticism to heart or from a sincere effort by party leaders to educate voters" (pp. 10-11). The largest group, consisting of twenty-six editorials, indicated support

of the League's decision to withdraw, but also suggested that the voters were the big losers. Three editorials were labeled by the researcher as being supportive of the League, but also angry. Seven editorials were characterized as being unsupportive of the League. According to the researcher, only one of the 46 editorials examined had nothing favorable to say about the League and its decision to withdraw from the debate.

The three 1988 general election debates, all sponsored by the Commission, featured identical formats (no opening statements, no follow-up questions, opportunities for single rebuttals), a broadcasting specialist moderator, three media panelists (two print media specialists in the first debate, two broadcasters in the second and third debates). The two presidential debates were held at universities; the vice-presidential debate was held at a civic center facility. Both foreign and domestic policy issues were raised in the debates, with a clear distinction drawn for these segments in the first debate only. In comparison to previous general election debates, these three encounters featured the following: (a) no follow-up questions (Only the 1960 debates, 1976 vice-presidential debate, and the 1980 Reagan-Anderson

debate had not featured follow-up questions.); (b) no reaction shots of opposing candidates solely in the camera frame (Only two-person shots from the side were provided.); and (c) boisterous audience reaction to candidate comments (due to the increased percentage of party representatives over community representatives). Whether these effects and those less noticed effects resulting from the tight restrictions imposed by the campaigns in the Memorandum of Understanding produced debates which reflected less of a representation of the public interest, as the League would call it, is still in question; the more important question is whether or not the public agenda was met through the debates such that the public was offered a reasonable opportunity to learn more about the candidates and what they represented.

Sponsorship Alternatives

The sponsorship issue in connection with presidential debates remains unresolved. The primary debates seem destined to be sponsored by a variety of groups. At this level, experimentation of formats is easily achieved and negotiation of terms seems less likely to be contested. Candidates are more willing to take risks in these events. Debate sponsorship at the general election level revolves around at least five

contenders.

The Television Networks. The national television networks have successfully hosted presidential debates on occasion; specifically, they sponsored the four 1960 presidential debates (CBS, NBC, ABC) before the League of Women Voters stepped into the role, primary debates in 1968 (ABC) and 1972 (CBS, NBC, ABC) through weekly news interview programs, two primary debates in 1984 (CBS, NBC) and one primary debate in 1988 (NBC) through special broadcasts.

Brokaw (1987) argues that the network news divisions have "no ideological drum to beat" (p. 74), that "journalism is the common forum for making choices" (p. 74) and that in covering the political conventions the networks have been "faithful to the viewers' need for fair and accurate analysis of what is happening behind the scenes as well as at the podium or on the floor" (p. 73). Cater counters this argument by saying that "sponsorship by the networks would confuse their role as reporters rather than managers of political events and would create incentives to exploit the debates for maximum entertainment value" (p. 87).

Brokaw states that he would not be opposed to joint sponsorship of these events by the networks and the American Society of Newspaper Editors or by

individual networks and individual newspapers; in so doing, he presents the case of cooperation between networks and newspapers in conducting national surveys (i.e., CBS and the New York Times, NBC with the Wall Street Journal, and ABC with the Washington Post.

Brokaw further makes his case by citing the two 1984 primary debates hosted by Dan Rather on CBS and himself on NBC, saying that "The single moderator format facilitated a coherent, continuous line of questioning...A great many issues were covered in some detail. All of the candidates and their managers expressed admiration for the format and gratitude for the opportunity" (pp. 74-75). While Brokaw does not suggest that the single moderator format is the only way to conduct a debate, he does argue for the successful quality of these particular debates because they were sponsored by networks. Finally, Brokaw comments on the power of the networks to see that debates take place, suggesting that they would not be pushed around by candidates and their managers, and that if a candidate were to refuse to debate the network could choose to televise a discussion with the opponent.

Swerdlow (1984) contends that the networks have the necessary technical expertise and adequate

financial resources. He further argues that since debates are staged solely for television (e.g., they are timed to the second to coincide with broadcast schedules), the networks are a logical sponsor. Like Brokaw, Swerdlow believes that the networks would possess more power than other potential sponsors in getting the candidates to participate in debates, since these events can only be broadcast by the networks.

On the negative side, Swerdlow (1984) points to a possible conflict of interest with network sponsors, since they are not public service organizations, but rather profit-making entities. In their effort to attract and satisfy a large quantity of viewers, Swerdlow argues, the networks might be tempted to "prepare for, promote, and stage debates that maximize the buildup, the excitement, and the drama -- and to equate good debates with good television" (p. 49). A case in point, Swerdlow contends, would be the use of audience reaction shots, the networks favoring them in the interests of "journalistic freedom" and the candidates likely not favoring them because of any possible inference about candidate performance. Another concern expressed by Swerdlow is the question of what television networks would do with third-party candidates. Minow and Sloan (1987) point to the fact

that since the networks do not have a formal relationship with candidates, the institutionalization of presidential debates does not become possible. Neuman and Harian (1987) argue that "Network sponsorship of debates would leave American voters even more vulnerable to the already far-reaching influence of the broadcast media on presidential campaigns and elections" (p. 78); this influence, the authors contend, is felt in decisions the media makes about what candidate campaign events to cover, "handicapping" of candidates as the campaign progresses, their involvement in candidate advertising time decisions, their reporting of public opinion surveys which they have commissioned, and endorsement of political candidates.

Swerdlow (1984) brings up the question of how the networks as debate sponsors would cover their own performance, specifically how they would provide coverage on the debate negotiations of which they were a part or on the workability of the format used in a debate which they arranged. Other journalistic institutions, argues Swerdlow, may be logical choices as debate sponsors because their job is to inform the public, but they would not necessarily be capable of securing candidate commitment to participate.

The Political Parties. Democratic party organizations at the state level and the Democratic Leadership Council frequently sponsored primary debates during the 1988 presidential campaign. Minow and Sloan (1987) contend that the political parties are "the most likely vehicle for institutionalizing debates" (p. 70) because of their ongoing relationship with the candidates. Cater (1987) counterargues by stating that the "political parties would not dare negotiate the debates in good faith until the major party nominees had been selected and had staked out their personal strategies" (p. 87).

Swerdlow (1984) points out that parties would enhance their role in American political life by sponsoring debates. However, he also contends that the parties would not force their candidate to participate in a debate that would lessen his chances of winning. Bipartisan sponsorship of these events, he adds, would shut out third-party contenders. Neuman and Harian (1987) argue that party-sponsored debates "could be little more than political pillow fights, with no referee--no honest broker--representing the public" (p. 79).

Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) argue that "if any single force in American politics can institutionalize

debates it is political parties" (p. 212). They further contend that sponsorship by the parties would enhance party identification with candidates. On the negative side, the researchers point to the fact that since the party nominee controls the "party machinery" and selects the party chair, he maintains control over the debate situation. Like Swerdlow (1984), they also recognize the exclusion of third-party candidates in debates sponsored by the political parties.

The Congress. The House Democratic Caucus sponsored a primary debate during the 1984 presidential campaign. Swerdlow (1987) maintains that the U. S. Congress should sponsor the debates, arguing that "Congress could make it extremely difficult--if not impossible--for candidates to play self-serving games about when and under what circumstances they would consent to a debate" and that "Congress could best guarantee the most unbiased debate arrangements" (p. 83). Cater (1987) counterargues by stating that "Congress has neither sought such sponsorship nor is likely to go against the strategies of the two major candidates" (p. 87) and that "its members are not in session and are otherwise electorally engaged during the campaign season" (p. 87).

Swerdlow (1984) contends that "members of Congress

would provide continuity and high levels of public trust" to the debate process. He suggests that either the Senate or House of Representatives could invite the major nominees to address them jointly, perhaps with a panel of congressional leaders posing questions to them or with the contenders answering questions put to them by floor members. Swerdlow argues that Congress would gain prestige by such sponsorship and the political parties would be strengthened by the process; he also believes that holding such events on Capitol Hill would evoke "images of presidential addresses to joint sessions of Congress" (p. 56).

The League of Women Voters. The League of Women Voters has sponsored nine general election debates (1976, 1980, 1984) and fourteen primary debates (1976, 1980, 1984, 1988), ten among Democratic contenders and four among Republicans. The League can be credited with institutionalizing vice-presidential debates (1976, 1984) and with providing a general election debate with a major party candidate (Reagan) alongside a minor party candidate (Anderson). As noted by Neuman and Harian, "with the 1976, 1980, and 1984 presidential debates the League of Women Voters became the only organization to have sponsored debates in three consecutive presidential primary and general elections"

(p. 77). The early developmental history of League sponsorship of presidential debates is well documented by Lampl (1979) and Decker (1981).

Neuman and Harian (1987), representing the League of Women Voters, argue that this body can "offer persistent pursuit of the public interest under all political circumstances" (p. 77) as a nonpartisan organization whose "chief objective is to help citizens cast informed votes" (p. 78). While Cater (1987) believes the League has "demonstrated the most valid experience in managing very difficult negotiations" and has acted as an "honest broker" in the past, it is also his contention that the League "lacks the enduring authority to assert primacy over all other competing claimants" (p. 87).

The candidates, according to Neuman and Harian (1987), have been the beneficiaries of the proliferation of debate sponsors in recent history, allowing them "the opportunity to shop around for the best possible--in other words, the safest--debates" (p. 78), at the expense of the public interest.

Swerdlow (1984) points to two problems with League sponsorship of presidential debates. The first is a perpetual problem, that of fund raising, and the second is that of continuity between top officials in the

League as new ones come in and others are replaced.

The Commission on Presidential Debates. The newly formed bipartisan Commission consists of ten directors, an executive director, and a fifty-member advisory board; its mission is to sponsor debates and educate voters (Prentice, 1988). According to Prentice, the Commission has no interest in sponsoring primary debates, rather it is positioning itself to be the sponsor of general election debates. Prentice contends that the League's withdrawal from the second debate will damage its credibility in gaining sponsorship for 1992 debates and that the "Commission's success in fund raising and in handling the technical aspects of sponsoring debates has put it in good stead for 1992" (p. 14). This, of course, remains to be seen.

Conclusions

Donatelli and Francis (1987) suggest that three factors can explain the apparent shift in control from debate sponsor to the candidates themselves since 1960: (a) candidates recognize that debates will not take place without them, thus they will not participate without consideration of their self-interests; (b) as the importance of fall campaign debates have been historically established, candidates are increasingly careful that all of the negotiated concerns coincide

careful that all of the negotiated concerns coincide with the strategies of their campaign; and (c) as the proliferation of debate sponsors has occurred, the leverage of an individual sponsor has declined. This suggests that the candidates will have a lot to say about the outcome of the current "debate" over presidential debate sponsorship.

Swerdlow (1984) believes that a debate sponsor must be considered fair by both the candidates and the public. He contends that the sponsor needs not only to be viewed as an "honest broker," but also as nonpartisan. The League of Women Voters in the past has been able to persuade those involved that it has had these qualities, has been notably successfully in negotiating terms for four cycles of presidential debates, and has dealt with difficult and perhaps controversial decisions (e.g., the question of including John Anderson in the 1980 general election debates). The Commission on Presidential Debates invited the League to serve in an advisory capacity to it and declined (Prentice, 1988). The "contest" over debate sponsorship appears to exist primarily at the general election level. The Commission and the League seem to be the principal contenders. Whether the Commission can bypass the criticisms associated with

party sponsorship of debates and whether the League will suffer long-term effects from its withdrawal in 1988 remains to be seen.

References

Brokaw, T. (1987). Networks should sponsor debates. In J. L. Swerdlow (Ed.), Presidential debates: 1988 and beyond (pp. 73-76). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

Cater, D. (1987). A presidential debates commission. In J. L. Swerdlow (Ed.), Presidential debates: 1988 and beyond (pp. 86-88). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

Dates set for debates. (1988, September 9). Kansas City Times, p. A-3.

Decker, W. D. (1981, November). The League of Women Voters: Sponsorship, promotion and definition of public political debate. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, Anaheim, CA.

Donatelli, F. J., & Francis, L. C. (1987). Sponsorship of presidential debates: Who does it? Who cares? In J. L. Swerdlow (Ed.), Presidential debates: 1988 and beyond (pp. 65-68). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

Fish, M. (1989, May). Deconstructing the 1988 presidential debates. Paper presented at the International Communication Association convention, San Francisco, CA.

Hellweg, S. A. (1982, November). Political debate formats: A state-of-the-art review. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, Louisville, KY.

Hellweg, S. A. (1984, November). The relationship of imposed format structures and emergent candidate verbal behaviors: A comparison of the 1984 primary and general election debates. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, Chicago, IL.

Jamieson, K. H, & Birdsell, D. S. (1988). Presidential debates: The challenge of creating an informed electorate. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lampl, P. (1979). The sponsor: The League of Women Voters Education Fund. In S. Kraus (Ed.), The great debates: Carter vs. Ford, 1976 (pp. 83-104). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Lang, G. E., & Kang, K. (1978). Immediate and delayed responses to a Carter-Ford debate: Assessing public opinion. Public Opinion Quarterly, 42, 322-341.

Martel, M. (1983). Political campaign debates: Images, strategies, and tactics. New York: Longman.

Minow, N. N., & Sloan, C. M. (1987). Political parties should Sponsor debates. In J. L. Swerdlow (Ed.), Presidential debates: 1988 and beyond (pp. 69-72).

Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

Neuman, N. M., & Harian, V. (1987). The League of Women Voters should sponsor debates. In J. L. Swerdlow (Ed.), Presidential debates: 1988 and beyond (pp. 77-81). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

Prentice, D. B. (1988, November). The Commission on Presidential Debates: A new approach to political debates or just a new sponsor? Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, New Orleans, LA.

Ritter, K., & Hellweg, S. A. (1986). The emergence of a new national forum for political debating: Televised presidential primary debates, 1956-1984. Journal of the American Forensic Association, 23, 1-14.

Sharbutt, J. (1988, October 12). Rather declines nomination to debate panel. The Los Angeles Times, p. I-11.

Steeper, F. T. (1978). Public response to Gerald Ford's statements on Eastern Europe in the second debate. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives (pp. 81-101). New York: Praeger.

Swerdlow, J. L. (1984). Beyond debate: A paper on televised presidential debates. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.

Swerdlow, J. L. (1987). The U. S. Congress should sponsor debates. In J. L. Swerdlow (Ed.), Presidential debates: 1988 and beyond (pp. 82-85). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

Zapple, N. (1979). Historical evaluation of Section 315. In Austin Ranney (Ed.), The past and future of presidential debates (pp. 56-69). Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

Footnotes

[1]This material was derived from an information circular entitled "Background of the Commission" which can be obtained from the Commission on Presidential Debates, 1825 I Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC, 20006.

[2]This information was acquired in a telephone interview with Vicky Harian of the League of Women Voters, October 21, 1988.

[3]The League of Women Voters issued a press release dated October 3, 1988, at a news conference officially announcing its withdrawal from the second presidential debate to be held in Los Angeles.